My aim here is to attempt to determine some of the rules that may legitimately be used for the process of response creation in a conversational setting. My assumption is that people bring a great deal of background information and rules about how to interpret what someone really means to the conversational setting. The process of communication is extremely complex, hence it is possible to make many different responses to a sentence. Also, sometimes the very act of not taking one of these options can be a statement in itself. Thus a large part of the conversational process takes place under the surface of the actual conversation. Our task, then, in trying to spell out the rules that people use in conversing, is to respond to all of what is going on, rather than solely to what is going on at the surface.

Perhaps the best vehicle for examining what goes on under the surface of a conversation is to look at a conversation between emotionally related people who share a great deal of background information. We have chosen, therefore, a hypothetical argument between a husband and a wife. When we begin to discuss our conversation, bear in mind that all we shall be trying to do is to help determine what can legitimately be said next. The “topic” of a sentence in a conversation is very much dependent on responses that are normally considered to be reasonable to that sentence. The speaker of the sentence in question usually has the best idea of what kind of response he expects or that he would find acceptable. The speaker himself knows what aspect of his sentence he considers to be most important, or the crux of what he is saying. A participant in a conversation must determine what the speaker expects from him in the way of a response and decide for himself how much he will conform to the speaker’s expectations. These are the kinds of notions that we will be attempting to deal with here.

With this in mind let’s look at the following conversation:

A1: Why were you out so late last night?
B1: I went bowling with the boys.

A2: I thought you hated bowling.
B2: It’s ok when I have some company.
A3: Aren’t I company?
B3: It’s not the same.

A4: Sure, because you can’t pick up women at home.
B4: I don’t pick up women at the bowling alley.

A5: Well, who says you go to the bowling alley?
B5: If I told you that’s where I was, that’s where I was.

A6: Then how come you smelled of perfume last night?
B6: What perfume? That was smoke.

A7: It sure was a funny kind of smoke.
B7: Well maybe it was.

A8: You’ll get arrested if you do that in a bowling alley.
B8: We didn’t do it in a bowling alley.

A9: Then where were you last night?
B9: All right. I was at Joe’s house. We had a few beers and smoked some dope. I didn’t want to tell you because I know you can’t stand Joe.

A10: Liar! And hanging around with that creep. I want a divorce.

Now let’s consider what is happening in this conversation. The first sentence is:

(A1) Why were you out so late last night?

If we ask ourselves what the topic of this sentence is, we find that we have a difficult time defining it. Is the topic here B’s lateness, or his whereabouts last night, or the reasons for both of those or what? A simpler question to ask is what the expected response to A1 is. That is, what does A expect to hear back? This is the major determinant in B’s response, so from a process model point of view it is a much more germane question than that of determining the topic of A1. In a sense then, since A1 is a very specific question, its topic is exactly equal to its expected response. As we have said, the key element in creating a response is the attempt to ascertain what the speaker had in mind for a response. When the speaker indicates directly what response he had in mind, then the rules for responding can work from there. Temporarily we can call the topic of a sentence the expected response.